

# Journal of Feminist Scholarship

---

Volume 16  
Issue 16 *Spring/Fall 2019*

Article 3

---

Fall 2019

## Bad Gurley Feminism: The Myth of Post-War Domesticity

Erin Amann Holliday-Karre  
*Qatar University*, [eholliday.karre@qu.edu.qa](mailto:eholliday.karre@qu.edu.qa)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/jfs>



Part of the [History of Gender Commons](#), [Literature in English](#), [North America Commons](#), [Women's History Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

---

### Recommended Citation

Holliday-Karre, Erin A.. 2020. "Bad Gurley Feminism: The Myth of Post-War Domesticity." *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 16 (Fall): 39-52. 10.23860/jfs.2019.16.03.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@URI. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@etal.uri.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@etal.uri.edu).

# Bad Gurley Feminism: The Myth of Post-War Domesticity

Erin Amann Holliday-Karre, Qatar University

**Abstract:** According to feminist history, the 1950s constitute a lapse in feminist literature as women in the post-war era were ushered into the realm of domesticity. In this article I argue that this perceived literary “gap” was both created and perpetuated by feminist historians and scholars who insist that Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) was the defining feminist text of the time. I offer an alternative discourse to that of Friedan by presenting feminist writers who challenge, rather than adopt, masculine ideology as the means to women’s empowerment. I end by encouraging feminists to allow commonly dismissed feminists from the 1950s, like *Cosmopolitan* editor Helen Gurley Brown and domestic humor writers Shirley Jackson and Jean Kerr, into the feminist canon.

**Keywords:** 1950s, Betty Friedan, Helen Gurley Brown, Shirley Jackson, Jean Kerr

Copyright by Erin Amann Holliday-Karre

Save for the publication of Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1953) (which didn’t gain popularity until the 1970s), the 1940s to the early 1960s constitute a gap in feminist scholarship; the language of “equality” and “liberation” used in the suffragette movement of the early twentieth century faded into terms such as “nuclear family,” “suburban expansion,” and “the happy housewife.” Many scholars reinforce the same narrative when imagining women of the post-war period: “Upon the return of servicemen to civilian life at the end of World War II, a host of public and private agencies pressured many women to abandon their wartime employments ... and readjust to the roles of housewives and mothers” (Ryan 2009, 77). The suggestion that prewar women were more liberated and more politically active, by nature of the fact that they were visible and employed, is underscored by focusing on the difficulty women of the post-war era had in readjusting to domestic life. In “‘I Was Appalled’: Invisible Antecedents of Second Wave Feminism,” Linda K. Kerber tries to account for the master narrative that overshadows and prohibits discussion of the 1950s and feminism: “Why do most people think that the feminist agenda did not emerge until 1969 or 1970? Because McCarthyism and Cold War anxieties muffled or silenced the voices that were outlining that agenda” (2002, 97). According to Kerber, it is not so much that feminism did not exist in the early postwar era, as it is that masculine ideology about warfare and the social value of democracy takes precedence. Women are represented in ways that reinforce their social value: the happy housewife reinforces national health and wellbeing. However, while Kerber places blame for the dearth of postwar feminism on more dominant political ideologies, I argue that this historical gap in feminist scholarship is partially the result of feminist historians and scholars who perpetuate the myth of female domesticity in the postwar period. Indeed, to this day, and despite many feminist theories that challenge the binaries between public/ private, subject/object, and active/ passive, feminist scholars still reinforce the same narrative of the postwar period that Betty Friedan outlined in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). In so doing, feminist scholars expose a preference for

traditionally masculine social values, the public, and the active and inadvertently silence those voices that challenge and disrupt that ideology.

In *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (2011), Clare Hemmings argues that the way feminists tell stories about feminist history and theory has political and ethical consequences: “If Western feminists can be attentive to the political grammar of our storytelling, if we can highlight reasons why that attention might be important, then we can also intervene to change the way we tell stories” (2). It is, thus, imperative to attend to the ways in which our storytelling about feminism in the 1950s exposes a preference not only for a unifying narrative but also for a particular feminist politics. By allowing Friedan to set the terms by which we as feminists come to define feminist politics and feminist ideology, we marginalize dissenting feminist voices and limit the potential for alternative feminist epistemologies. Indeed, we close off the postwar era and perpetuate this gap in feminist history.

bell hooks astutely draws attention to Friedan’s “classism, her racism, and her sexist attitudes” in her refusal to engage with both non-white and working class women (2000, 2). I begin this essay by arguing the pitfalls of Friedan’s *theoretical* position, which proclaims the superiority of masculine ideology, and follow with a discussion of the ways in which contemporary feminist scholars reinforce a limited and limiting narrative of the postwar era. Indeed, contemporary feminist readings of feminism in the 1940s and 1950s tend to be anachronistic, as they rely too heavily on the definition of feminism produced in the late 1960s. Or, as the Birmingham Feminist History group argues, feminism in the 1950s “was bound by femininity in such a manner that we as feminists today do not easily recognize its activities as feminist” (2005, 6). I, then, offer an alternative feminist history that challenges popular representations of the domestic postwar woman through a re-reading of “housewife writers” Jean Kerr and Shirley Jackson.<sup>1</sup> Finally, I argue that when feminists begin to challenge rather than adopt masculine ideologies, we will recognize the importance of expanding the feminist canon to include often dismissed and eschewed feminist voices, such as *Cosmopolitan* editor Helen Gurley Brown.

Friedan’s central thesis in *Mystique* is that women of the postwar era suffer from a “problem that has no name,” a problem that, she argues, is both created and perpetuated by the mass market image of the 1950s happy housewife. According to Friedan, “the image of women that emerges from [magazines] is young and frivolous; almost childlike; fluffy and feminine; passive; gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies, and home” (2001, 82). This false image, according to Friedan, leads to a very real problem for women, which produces symptoms including: inner turmoil, feelings of wanting something more, emptiness, dissatisfaction, non-existence, and guilt. Friedan aims to articulate both the domestic and femininity in general as dangerous to a woman’s health. This becomes problematic to the extent that what is considered masculine never comes under fire in *The Feminine Mystique*. She does not question the fact that what it means to be an adult, to be serious, domestic, and to be active is defined by masculine ideology. According to Friedan, the image of the feminine domestic oppresses all women. Friedan does not challenge the ideology that presents the feminine as “fluffy,” “frivolous,” and “passive.” For Friedan women should fight against domesticity because it is literally making them sick. But if the image of the happy housewife is oppressive, it is not inherently so. It only becomes negative if we embrace the ideology of the masculine as preferable and the public and the active as both positive and powerful. It is merely a question of social value.

In her introduction to the 1997 edition of *Mystique*, Friedan seems satisfied that her book served its initial purpose: “marriage moved to a new kind of equality, and stability, as women went back to school, went to law school, got promoted in serious jobs, and began to share the earning burden” (2001, 27). While I do not want to suggest that the social “gains” women achieved in the late twentieth century were unimportant, I do question the definition of the word equality. Saying that women achieved equality

and then defining equality in relationship to law school, serious jobs, and earning burdens allows masculine social values to become the norm and what women should aspire to. Suggesting that what women need in order to be socially fulfilled is to have what men have further perpetuates the negativity that is associated with the feminine realm. What becomes problematic about Friedan's argument is that it serves to articulate the truth in masculine ideology, which argues that domestic spaces are inferior to public spaces by nature of the fact that they are feminine. Women must, according to Friedan, reject domesticity as it denies women their identity as human beings and their autonomy, and infantilizes them. Women are victims, prisoners in the home, and must find ways to free themselves from domestic responsibilities. Those women who claim to get any pleasure in the home are, according to Friedan, suffering from false consciousness. Thus, feminists and happy housewives come to be seen as opposing positions.<sup>2</sup> Friedan acknowledges that the image of the happy housewife is a fiction when she writes in women's magazines, "the formulas themselves, which have dictated the new housewife image, are the products of men" (2001, 105). But she does not seem to recognize that the opposite is also true: the masculine is also a fictional product, one that includes the ideologies of economics, politics, and sex. For Friedan, the feminine is false and the masculine is true.

However, the social values that placed on masculinity or femininity are both masculine ideologies: beliefs that establish the masculine, the political, and the serious as preferable, healthy, and human. Instead of treating this image as an ideological fiction, Friedan underscores the fact that these fictive images mask some kind of reality from which women suffer. The issue is feminists turning representations into comfortable realities. The challenge is not to create a new, better, or more real representations of women; rather, it is to challenge the ones that already exist. The belief that there is some "reality" for women to find is also a masculine ideology. By turning the representation of the domestic as a happy space for women into a negative space for women, Friedan does women in the home a huge disservice. She, perhaps inadvertently, argues that domestic women's lives are frivolous, passive, and infantile. But domesticity is neither passive nor active negative or positive. What must be investigated is the ideology that defines them as such.

Friedan turns masculine representations of women into reality, suggesting that all women internalize this fiction. Friedan argues just as myopically that domestic roles are a real problem that plague real women: "Forbidden to join man in the world, can women be people? Forbidden independence, they finally are swallowed in an image of such passive dependence that they want men to make the decisions even in the home" (2001, 100). She does not question the social values that define people, passivity, or dependence. Instead, she confirms it, upholds it, and perpetuates it, which in turn binds and chains women to masculine beliefs: "when a mystique is strong, it makes its own fiction of fact. It feeds on the very facts which might contradict it" (112). Friedan suggests that American women buy into the ideal of the happy and fulfilled housewife, even though that ideal is responsible for the "stunting or evasion of growth" (133).

Friedan tries to locate the various sources that perpetuate the feminine mystique and in doing so many institutions and people come under attack. According to Friedan, the greatest offenders include: "housewife writers," such as Kerr and Jackson; women's magazines; mass culture; Freudian psychoanalysts; and 'functionalist' sociologists, such as Mirra Komarovsky. However, in the past twenty years, feminist scholars and historians have expressed discontent with Friedan's blanket dismissal of women's culture in the 1950s. For example, In "The Way to a Man's Heart: Gender Domestic Ideology, Roles, and Cookbooks in the 1950s," Jessamyn Neuhaus argues, "too often historians have echoed Betty Friedan's most famous work and have characterized the postwar era as uniformly repressive, oppressive, and miserable for women" (1999, 529). By drawing attention to the cookbooks designed to help women

“cheat” at cooking, Neuhaus is one of the few feminist historians who attempts to challenge negative cultural assumptions about the domestic sphere. According to Neuhaus, many cookbooks acknowledged that the busy modern woman of the 1950s had little time to spend in the kitchen. Far from asserting traditional gender roles for women, the cookbooks analyzed by Neuhaus, “were deeply ambivalent about traditional gender roles” (547).

More commonly, contemporary feminists imagine revisionary narratives whereby the post-war period is read as a subtle pre-cursor to the larger feminist movement of the 1970s. For example, in “Humor and Gender Roles of the Post-World War II Suburbs,” Nancy Walker argues that, contrary to Friedan’s argument, domestic humor writers did not think domesticity was very funny at all: “Below the surface of the humor are significant signs of restlessness and disease” (1985, 99). After Walker’s influential essay, feminist scholars began to study the 1950s in a way that read popular culture as much more aligned with Friedan’s ideology than Friedan gave it credit for. In “It’s Good to Blow Your Top’: Women’s Magazines and a Discourse of Discontent, 1945-1965,” Eva Moskowitz argues that, contrary to Friedan’s pronouncement, “[women’s] magazines did not merely promote ‘the happy housewife’ image” (1996, 67); rather, according to Moskowitz’s research, “images of unhappy, angry, and depressed women figure prominently in these magazines” (ibid.).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Moskowitz found that women’s magazines often expressed the fear that women were unhappy as housewives.

Thanks, in part, to Friedan, feminists have seemingly stopped looking to the 1950s as a time period of feminist activity except in ways that support Friedan’s initial belief. Even attempts to prove Friedan wrong ended up strengthening her argument that women are oppressed by the home. The problem is not Friedan’s world-view or her feminism; it is that she does not extend it far enough and she claims too many ideas as her own without citing other feminists. For example, in “When Sex Became Gender: Mirra Komarovsky’s Feminism of the 1950s,” Shira Tarrant argues that sociologist Mirra Komarovsky’s *Women in The Modern World* (1953) is proof that there was a feminist movement in the 1950s. While Tarrant notes that, “Most feminist minded thinkers of the 1950s agreed that discrimination against women was based on crude ideas of masculine superiority – ideas that would have to be eliminated” (2005, 335-36), she does not seem to understand the consequence of that claim. Tarrant concludes that, “Friedan popularized the concept of ‘the problem that has no name,’ which was essentially an adaptation of Komarovsky’s phrase ‘the subtle signs of women’s discontent’” (345). The question begs to be asked: how does one “eliminate” masculine superiority by asserting that masculine ideology is correct, that domesticity is inferior because it stifles and oppresses? Such an argument actually strengthens the belief in “masculine superiority.”

What is most consistent about feminist scholarship on the 1950s is the continual negative identification that feminists conceive of with regard to the realm of the domestic. For example, in “A Faithful Anatomy of Our Times’: Reassessing Shirley Jackson,” Angela Hague argues that “history has not been kind to Shirley Jackson” but quickly goes on to blame male critics for the fact that Jackson remains a fairly obscure writer from the 1950s (2005, 73). Hague suggests that Jackson’s obscurity resulted from the fact that her more serious gothic novels and short stories conflict aesthetically with her domestic fiction. Hague argues that a reconsideration of Jackson is necessary, but not by referencing her domestic fiction (the fiction that male critics despised). Instead, Hague turns to Jackson’s short stories to show the way in which Jackson represents her time period: “By focusing on her female characters’ isolation, loneliness, and fragmented identities, their simultaneous inability to relate to the world outside ... Jackson displays in pathological terms the position of many women in the 50s” (74). It appears feminist scholars only know how to tell one story (Friedan’s story) in their representations of women of the 1950s. Where there is evidence that contradicts the view of the housewife as oppressed, such as the domestic fiction of Jackson,

feminists continue to turn their heads and stick with the master narrative that the domestic space is inferior. This troubles me as a feminist because the domestic as the source of women's unhappiness is ideologically tied to masculine belief systems and further strengthens patriarchal inequities. I do not mean to suggest that the domestic should be upheld as some ideal space beyond masculine intervention. That would be impossible because, as Freidan says, what we think of as the domestic sphere has also been created by male discourse. My suggestion extends beyond discourses. Feminist interventions into history should be cognizant of these binaries (public/private, active/passive, good/bad) and be careful not to perpetuate them. Indeed, what becomes more interesting in a discussion of the 1950s is a focus on the ways in which women writers actually go about destroying cultural assumptions about women not by perpetuating them or by denying them but by laughing at and thus refusing them.

When Freidan openly criticizes "housewife writers" she does so because she argues that they take a very serious problem (the exploitation of housewives) and laugh about it in their fiction. In discussing Jackson's *Life Among the Savages* (1953) and Kerr's *Please Don't Eat the Daisies* (1957), Friedan writes:

There is something about Housewife Writers that isn't funny-like Uncle Tom, or Amos and Andy. 'Laugh,' the Housewife Writers tell the real housewife, 'if you are feeling desperate, empty, bored, trapped in the bedmaking, chauffeuring and dishwashing details. Isn't it funny? We're all in the same trap.' Do real housewives then dissipate in laughter their dreams and their sense of desperation? Do they think their frustrated abilities and their limited lives are a joke? Shirley Jackson makes the beds, loves and laughs at her son, and writes another book. Jean Kerr's plays are produced on Broadway. The joke is not on them. (2001, 57)

Unlike feminists such as Joan Rivière, Virginia Woolf, Lucy Irigaray, and Hélène Cixous – who all, in some way suggest laughter as a response to systems of power<sup>4</sup>—Freidan sees laughter as a perpetuation of injustice rather than as a challenge to masculine discourse.<sup>5</sup> For Friedan, the role of a housewife is inherently unjust. Friedan never challenges the values that underpin her reading of domestic life, nor does she consider the ways in which she belittles the lives of so many women who do not conform to those values: the values that support domestic lives as "limited," "frustrated," and "desperate." While Friedan claims that these domestic humor writers are reinforcing women's exploitation, their "crime" is actually much more dangerous: they do not reinforce the social value of masculine ideology.

Friedan argues that in order for women to realize their true potential, their identity as human beings rather than as wives and mothers, they must make, create, and be productive on a "real political" level. However, Friedan's "real political" is defined by men and thus, the "public" space is no less freeing. The challenge "housewife writers" like Kerr and Jackson pose intervenes in the ideology of identity, politics, and that of the domestic ideal. Not uncoincidentally, both of these writers open their books by saying that their goal in life is to be unproductive thus challenging the social value of work and its relationship to identity formation. Kerr asserts her life goal was realized by age eight: "All I wanted out of life was to sleep until noon" (1957, 10). While this may seem like nonsense, it does so because it refuses to conform to any social value of productivity established for men and women in the west. Kerr's childhood poem that follows is quite subversive.

Dearer to me than the evening star  
A Packard Car  
A Hershey Bar  
Or a bride in her rich adorning

Dearer than any of these by far  
Is to lie in bed in the morning. (11)

In this early poem, Kerr rejects her role as both wife and consumer (and by implication future mother). Indeed fulfillment comes from being non-productive, from refusing to conform to a system that limits her potential beyond that of wife and consumer.

Like Kerr, Jackson challenges the authority of dominant social values. Jackson states that she “cannot think of a preferable way of life except one without children and without books, going on soundlessly in an apartment hotel where they do the cleaning for you and send up your meals and all you have to do is lie on a couch” (1953, 2). Jackson refuses to admit that her identity is in anyway linked to either her role as mother or to that of her education. The desire she expresses to “lie on a couch” all day challenges the notion that work is the ideal to which women should aspire. Both writers eschew the masculine value systems by which women and men come to see themselves as fulfilled or identified. While Friedan faults the domestic humor writers for thinking domesticity is funny, Jackson and Kerr reject both patriarchal definitions of motherhood and labor as social values. Friedan, on the other hand, clearly upholds working outside the home as that to which women should aspire.

It seems necessary to point out the fact that nearly all “housewives” writing at this time are preoccupied with the idea of occupation and defining themselves in relationship to what they do and where they work. This is, perhaps, unsurprising given that western male philosophers from Karl Marx onward assert that what separates man from the animals is his ability to make, to create. Or, as Friedan writes, “down through the ages, man has known that he was apart from the animals by his mind’s power to have an idea, a vision, and shape the future to it” (2001, 121). Thus, Friedan infers that if a woman does not have a profession, she has nothing to separate herself from the animals. She is less than a man.

What unites Friedan, Jackson, and Kerr is that they share a similar anxiety over institutions that demand they publicly state their social value and reinforce “housewife” as having little social value in comparison to other “professions.” Indeed, this anxiety is found at nearly every level of American society: from census forms, to hospital forms, and popular magazines. In her introduction to the 1973 edition of *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan recalls the anxiety she felt after a visit from a census taker:

A suburban neighbor of mine named Gerty was having coffee with me when the census taker came as I was writing the *Feminine Mystique*. ‘Occupation?’ the census taker asked. ‘Housewife,’ I said. Gerty, who had cheered me on in my efforts at writing and selling magazine articles, shook her head sadly ... I hesitated and said to the census taker, ‘Actually, I am a writer.’ But, of course, I was and still am, like all married women in America, no matter what *else* we do between 9 and 5, a housewife. (2001, 44)

Here, Friedan asserts that woman who “cheer” each other on are also women who support the “housewife” as a pejorative term; female support is defined as women who help each other to escape the awful box on a census form. Rather than questioning the “housewife” as a category that is able to describe the lived experience of women in the 1950s, Friedan strengthens the category and adds to it a notion of inevitable doom. In so doing, Friedan does not just describe women’s oppression but also constitutes it.

This anxiety is one that Friedan carries over from the first edition of *Feminine Mystique* where she blames the articles in *Ladies Home Journal* for the anxiety that women feel as housewives:

They usually begin with a woman complaining that when she has to write ‘housewife’ on the census

blank, she gets an inferiority complex ... Then the author of the paean, who is somehow never a housewife ... roars with laughter. The trouble with you, she scolds, is you don't realize you are an expert in a dozen careers simultaneously. (2001, 89)

While *Ladies Home Journal* could be read as challenging the notion of a single career by which women and men define themselves in the service of the national census, laughing at the ridiculous nature of such questions, Friedan would have us believe that the census board actually has the ability to affect how it is that women come to define themselves. The word "housewife," in Friedan's text, is a definitive marker of inferiority.

However, the roar of laughter that rings out from *The Ladies Home Journal* is echoed by domestic humor writers. Their laughter challenges both public institutions and popular definitions of women in general. For domestic humor writers, laughter challenges the notion that the category "housewife" could even possibly define women. In recalling the story of her visit to the hospital for the birth of her third child, Jackson recalls that the desk clerk asks her a set of preliminary questions before she can be admitted to the hospital, questions that have no bearing on a woman's ability to give birth, but nonetheless seek to define women in relationship to their occupation:

'Name?' the desk clerk said to me politely, her pencil poised. 'Name,' I said vaguely. I remembered and told her. 'Age?' she asked. 'Sex? Occupation?' 'Writer,' I said. 'Housewife,' she said. 'Writer.' I said. 'I'll just put down housewife,' she said ... 'Husband's name?' she said? 'Address? Occupation?' 'Just put down housewife,' I said. 'I don't remember his name, really.' (1953, 67-68)

The repetition of the words "just put down housewife" not only implies the word "housewife" as an insult, or a "put down" but also suggests "housewife" as a word that can neither define a woman (Jackson) nor a man (her nameless husband). Here Jackson empties the word housewife of its pejorative meaning by suggesting that it actually means nothing. "Housewife" can just as easily be applied to a woman writer as a man.

I argue that seeing the post-war period as a politically inactive time period for feminism leads to the belief that Friedan is the only significant feminist writing during this time.<sup>6</sup> Friedan remains *the* feminist voice of the postwar generation, and feminists often note that *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) has sold over three million copies in the past thirty years. But what would feminism look like if we refused to claim the masculine position as the position of social value? Who would be the voice of this new feminist history? And how might this change reflect a challenge to rather than a confirmation of masculine social values? Gurley Brown's *Sex and the Single Girl* (1962), published a year prior to Friedan's book, sold two million copies in just the first three weeks. If Gurley Brown's more popular book is now out of print, it is at least in part because feminist historians have failed to see the value of a feminist who challenges masculine ideology on issues like identity, sexuality, and gender difference, rather than perpetuating it. Indeed, the narrative that we have created about a domestic postwar era limits the potential for any alternative feminist history: a history that views traditional notions of femininity and masculinity as fictional constructs created and defined by men.

The publication of Jennifer Scanlon's *Bad Girls Go Everywhere: The Life of Helen Gurley Brown* (2009) gave immediacy to my thoughts about how challenging Friedan might prove valuable to our conception about what constitutes feminism, particularly in the post-war period. Public reaction to Scanlon's biography helps to underscore my argument about the pitfalls of masculine-identified



feminism. In a *New York Times* (2009) review of *Bad Girls*, Ginia Bellafante rebukes Scanlon's attempt to place Gurley Brown on equal footing with the likes of Freidan whose efforts (along with that of second-wave feminism) are "nobler" than that of the "apolitical" and "anhedonic" writings of Gurley Brown. Yet, Scanlon's biography sparked a chain of attention to the former editor-in-chief at *Cosmopolitan* magazine, including a 2009 article in *The New Yorker* entitled "Helenism: The Birth of the Cosmo Girl" by Judith Thurman. Unlike Bellafante, Thurman is "happy to see Brown getting her due as a pioneer of libidinal equality." But Thurman similarly warns her readers against taking Gurley Brown too seriously because, as she argues, Scanlon desires to "seek a moral in the glittering life of a bad girl." Thurman assumes a discord between Scanlon's "savant" discussion of second and third-wave feminism, and the vision of Brown as a pioneer who bridges the gap between these more serious minded approaches. As Thurman sees it, Gurley Brown does not require, deserve, or evoke such serious-mindedness. Gurley Brown was, quite simply, "a classic poor girl on the make, lusty and driven." Feminism's exclusion and devaluation of Gurley Brown is a concern at the heart of Scanlon's biography—and it appears that her text has not had the desired effect. At best, Gurley Brown remains "feminist" to the extent that *Sex and the City's* Carrie Bradshaw and her often-cited predecessor Lorelei Lee from *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* are "feminist." She is shamelessly materialistic and self-sufficient, worthy enough to be our girlfriend but not our mentor. Or, more disastrously, according to Bellafante, Gurley Brown is about as worthy to be labeled "feminist" as Sarah Palin. She's a neophyte, a dilettante.

Why should feminists *not* consider Gurley Brown seriously? Contrary to Thurman's argument that Scanlon is searching for "morals," Scanlon is really quite frank about the reasons why feminists have historically rejected Gurley Brown, or about why she qualifies as a "bad girl." Gurley Brown is a self-proclaimed feminist, a capitalist, and a pick-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps individualist. She did not go to college. She is from a lower-class background. She speaks the language of single working-class women about how to get ahead, and she is unapologetic in her endorsement of femininity and the beauty regiment. Gurley Brown argues that women should work the system rather than fight it, is happy when *Cosmopolitan* is accused of turning women into sexual objects ("I say bravo!"), and refuses to argue the evils of women's victimization (2009, 174). Gurley Brown further argues that single women, when strapped for cash, should absolutely accept (indeed expect) monetary assistance from men, and urges single women to have affairs with married men. In short, Gurley Brown threatens to undo all of the serious work feminists undertake. If we believe the reviews above, Gloria Steinem was right when she argued that Gurley Brown is a victim of patriarchy (albeit an extremely successful and wealthy victim) (Scanlon 2009, xi).

Although Scanlon may have failed to elicit a feminist reaction that differs from Steinem's early dismissal, it is not entirely her fault (though, as a book by a popular press, many arguments made against Gurley Brown go under-theorized). As Scanlon (2009) all too subtly explains, good feminists, complex feminists, serious feminists, upper class, educated feminists prefer arguments that espouse the same values and ideologies as white intellectual males. Feminism too often accepts the value of "reality" rather than challenging it. Scanlon provides an example of this complicity in her discussion of *The Feminine Mystique*. Scanlon astutely points out that Friedan does not consider alternatives to masculine discourse when asserting the inferiority of women's home lives, even as her contemporary Julia Child frequently articulates the joys and art of cooking as creative outlet for the "servantless American cook." But *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* (1961) is only slightly more likely to enter the feminist canon than Gurley Brown's *Sex and The Single Girl*. Coincidentally, neither of these authors espouses the view that femininity or women are inferior to men or that to liberate women, feminism must go in the direction of

the system that defines femininity as such. Oddly enough, “liberation” under the terms dictated by men reads a lot like assimilation.

Because feminists in the contemporary media have shown a preference for a masculine-identified model of feminism as exemplified by Freidan, feminism in the popular press exposes an alliance with masculine power as *the* means to incorporate women into the political economy of men. To provide space for feminists who challenge masculine power and the value of masculine truth claims would be to allow for a greater number of influential women to be included in the feminist canon: women who do not subscribe to the innocence or the victimization of women (we are partially responsible); women who suggest, like Gurley Brown, ways to play with the system rather than supporting it or opposing it (insofar as opposition is also a part of that system). Can we not infer irony from Gurley Brown’s “bravo?” Can we not, like Liz Conor in *The Spectacular Modern Woman* (2004), see women who objectify themselves as posing a challenge to the ideology of the object status?

What is particularly feminist about Gurley Brown’s *Sex and the Single Girl* is that it presents a challenge to the dominant social values of its day, values by which women come to define themselves and their status in society. Gurley Brown holds up the “single girl” as the social ideal. The single girl, for Gurley Brown, is “emerging as the newest glamour girl of our times” (1962, 5). Marriage, for Gurley Brown, is treated merely as an option. Hers is advice on “how to stay single” (1962, 11). And while it is true that Gurley Brown spends a great deal of time discussing how to attract men, there is rarely a suggestion that attracting men has one specific end goal or function. In an example of an alternative feminist discourse, Gurley Brown describes the agency of the single woman, while simultaneously refusing to engage in the productive morality of both meaning and value:

Sex, of course, is more than the act of coitus. It begins with that delicious feeling of attraction between two people. It may never go further, but sex it is. And a single woman may promote the attraction, bask in the sensation, drink it like wine, and pour it over her like blossoms, with never a guilty twinge. She can promise with a look, a touch, a letter or a kiss and she doesn’t have to deliver. She can be maddeningly hypocritical, and after arousing desire, insist that it be shut off by stating that she wants to be chaste for the man she marries. Her pursuer may strangle her with his necktie but he can’t argue with her. (1962, 7)

What Gurley Brown defines as sex looks more like the traditional definition of seduction, often seen as immoral and self-serving, but her insistence upon using the term “sex” destabilizes sex as a masculine system of meaning making and value. From the ironic “of course” (you didn’t know?) to the suggestion that sex is a means to another means with no end, Gurley Brown shows how the system can be used to the advantage of the single woman, whereby women are allowed complete control over their sexual relationships. Masculine ideology can call this woman hypocritical, but that is in itself a hypocritical move. For within a contradictory structure, how can a woman avoid being hypocritical? Gurley Brown takes the derogatory term “hypocritical” ascribed to single women, and relocates the offence to indict the gender structure itself.

For Gurley Brown, sex and sexuality are not so much about playing *by* the rules as playing *with* the rules. The man with the necktie, in Gurley Brown’s prose, is knowable. We can anticipate his anger and can predict his violence, but *he* cannot deny that he is responsible for the structure used to torture him. Thus, for Gurley Brown, patriarchal masculine social values lead to violence in the first place. The “necktie’s” assurance in the power of his deductive reasoning and knowledge has failed him: he does not know if the woman will engage in coitus -- but somehow she is already engaging him in sex. The irony

here is that “sex” may or may not be coitus, but it may also be the biological term “sex” as “female” or “feminine.” Thus a “single girl” engaging in sex is performing femininity. If, as many feminists suggest, a woman’s inferior status is dependent upon the fact that she be unknowable, undefinable, unclassifiable, and controllable as female then Brown certainly turns this inferiority on its head. Because the single woman’s role is ambiguous, she finds agency in the very ambiguity of her position.

Gurley Brown’s discussion of the need to wear cosmetics might seem antithetical to feminist aims; however, through her discussion of make-up, Gurley Brown asks her single girl to challenge the binary between truth and fiction by employing artifice. In so doing, Gurley Brown not only proclaims femininity as a social construct but also challenges the truth claims of masculine ideology. “Make-up, like clothes, can change your personality on different days,” writes Gurley Brown, “You can be a baby-eyed angel or a devilish, smoke eyes siren with the same irises. Never knowing who you’ll be next may shake up your beau a bit” (1962, 206). Here Gurley Brown shows that femininity is linked to the principle of uncertainty and indeterminacy, and is designed to “shake” men up. The point of wearing cosmetics, in Gurley Brown’s text, is to challenge masculine claims to both knowledge and truth. Not only does Gurley Brown’s discussion of make-up call into question the determinacy of gender but also that of identity. She challenges the philosophical notion of identity/difference by asking women to play with signs. Femininity, in Gurley Brown’s text, is not a matter of psychology or sexuality but a game of artifice designed to blur the lines between illusion and essence. If the project of masculine philosophy is to bring all signs into the realm of the known, to make women ‘mean’ something according to dominant social values (as evidenced by Freud’s famous quotation, “What do women want?”), then encouraging women to wear make-up is actually asking women to challenge the dictates of masculine truth claims, which in psychoanalytic discourse classified women into sexual types.<sup>7</sup>

Gurley Brown also defies feminist ideals that establish women’s social value through their labor. In her advice to women on how to save money, for example, Gurley Brown challenges the distinction between wants and needs, the foundation for Marx’s theory of economics. In a tongue-and-cheek example of advice for women under financial pressure, Gurley Brown tells her single girl, “Don’t spend a sou on anything you don’t need. (You *need* iridescent gold eyeshadow, but what about that essence-of-pine air purifier somebody was selling door to door?)” (1962, 106). Making fun of the distinction between wants and needs not only challenges the hierarchy of needs, but also the common assertion that women are frivolous – a concern upheld by Friedan as oppressive and which Gurley Brown is asking her single girl to laugh at. When feminists take issue with Gurley Brown’s claim that single women should “expect and encourage gifts from men” as “part of the spoils of being single,” they do so because Gurley Brown upends the social value of hard work and payment, not because she ever suggests that these gifts should be repaid (1962, 15). While the word “spoils” in this quotation could be understood “stolen goods,” that would not really make sense. It is more likely that she means “spoils” as in “destroying the value of something.” Gurley Brown is encouraging her “single girl” to challenge the value of hard work and payment through the non-reciprocal acceptance of gifts.

While there is much for feminists to take issue with in *Sex and the Single Girl*, many ideas presented by Gurley Brown are groundbreaking for the time, from her questions about the social value of virginity to her proclamation that being sexually attracted to another woman is nothing to feel guilty about. Even her definition of the term “sexy” asks the single girl to recognize sexuality as something socially constructed rather than innate. In her chapter on “How to be Sexy” Gurley Brown discusses the ways in which, from childhood, women’s bodies are reinforced as something “naughty” or to be ashamed. Being sexy for Gurley Brown is thus a rejection of this “cultural blight” (1962, 68): “Being sexy means that you accept all parts of your body as worthy and loveable ... your reproductive organs, your breasts, your

alimentary tract” (65). Furthermore, Gurley Brown notes that it is the social construction of gender roles rather than some biological difference between the sexes which may allow men to experience sexual pleasure to a greater degree than women: “Men usually arrive at maturity less deadened sexually than girls and so may achieve more climaxes. They weren’t as often admonished to keep their dresses down and their knees together” (68). The idea of sexual maturity, explained by Freud’s as the “natural” progression of sexual stages, is challenged by Gurley Brown who sees sexual maturity as a social construct perpetuated by dominant social values.

To allow women like Gurley Brown into the feminist canon would be to imagine a place for a feminism that challenges rather than coopting masculine value systems, which feminists like Eve Sedgwick found difficult to change.<sup>8</sup> Feminism that focuses on the dissemination rather than the perpetuation of information about women poses a radical challenge to masculine value systems. The challenge is not to incorporate women into the masculine model. Rather, the challenge is to disseminate the masculine model – not through opposition, but in finding the fissures that underscore the weakness of masculine discourse and to use these discourses for feminist purposes while being careful not to slip into legitimating the “truth” of that discourse.

Fortunately, and thanks in large part to present day nostalgia for the 1950s and 60s in popular culture, work on feminism of the post-war period is ongoing if only by nature of the fact that once disregarded figures from the 1950s are finally being discussed in feminist discourse. For example, in “‘Is It Ridiculous for me to Say I Want to Write?’: Domestic Humor and Redefining the 1950s Housewife Writer in Fan Mail to Shirley Jackson,” Jessamyn Neuhaus argues that “fans of Jackson’s writing clearly believed that the figure of the housewife writer offered them an opportunity for extending and even challenging those domestic ideals by becoming writers themselves, and perhaps joining a community of women beginning to question those limitations” (2009, 122). Although I would foreground a challenge to masculine systems of value as necessary to understanding the social devaluation of domestic roles, reinforcing the ways in which western ideology underscores the importance of the masculine over the feminine, acknowledging Jean Kerr, Shirley Jackson, and Helen Gurley Brown as important feminist figures is certainly an important step toward recognizing another perspective on the post-war period.

---

## Notes

1. Today, Shirley Jackson is perhaps most famous for her gothic short story *The Lottery* (1948) or her novel *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959).

2. I argue that these early oppositions set up between women by feminists like Freidan are partially responsible for feminism’s “bad” reputation. Confronting negative assumptions takes up much of our work, as evidenced by entire works dedicated to expelling myths of tyranny and defending feminism as necessary (i.e., hooks 2000; Valenti 2007).

3. Joanne Meyerowitz argues something similar in her essay when she writes, “the postwar mass culture embraced the same central contradiction – the tension between domestic ideals and individual achievement – that Friedan addressed in *The Feminine Mystique*” (1993, 1458). She furthers “Betty Friedan drew on mass culture as much as she countered it” (ibid.). Is it possible, then, that Friedan purposefully read magazines and mass culture in a way that denied a more prevalent *ambivalence* toward domesticity in the 1950s? Daniel Horowitz argues that “Friedan’s portrayal of herself as so totally trapped by the feminine mystique” was, in fact, a publicity stunt, a “story [that] made it possible for readers to identify with its author and its author to enhance the book’s appeal” (1996, 2). Horowitz cites both Friedan’s change in name (from Elinor Flexner) and her change in occupation (from labor

journalist to housewife) as evidence. According to Horowitz, Friedan created an artificial separation between the 1960s and the previous years. Is it possible, then, that historical readings that rely on the accuracy of Friedan's book about women in the 1950s are misleading?

4. Consider Joan Riviere discussion of a woman university professor who is prone to laughter when addressing the all-male faculty members at her university, "She becomes flippant and joking, so much so that it has caused comment and rebuke. She has to treat the situation of displaying her masculinity to men as a game, something *not real* [sic], as a 'joke'" (1929, 308). This example has political implications: what frustrates masculine ideology is the refusal to take it seriously. Additionally, Cixous understands women are bound to language that always privileges men and power. She argues for writing, laughter, and disinterest as responses to phallographic structures: "If she's a her-she, it's in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the 'truth' with laughter" (1976, 888). Further, Virginia Woolf repeats a request for laughter in her discussion of the "outsider society": "But directly that the mulberry tree begins to make you circle, break off. Pelt the tree with laughter" (1977, 92). Finally, Luce Irigaray is a strong proponent of laughter in response to masculine subject positions. She argues that, "to escape from a pure and simple reversal of the masculine position means in any case not to forget to laugh" (1985, 163). In each case, laughter becomes that which denies patriarchy and masculine ideologies.

5. Jean Baudrillard writes, "Why does one laugh? One only laughs at the figure of reversibility of things ... it is because the stake is always reversible between masculine and feminine, between life and death, that one laughs" (2006, 145). Laughter is a crucial theme in feminist literature because refuses only one perception of "reality" and "truth." In refusing to uphold the value of masculine discourse, feminism challenges masculine ideology and the belief that woman are always oppressed.

6. Kim Tofolletti's (2007) work on Barbie dolls (brought into existence in the late 1950s and often used as an icon for women of that time period) is also helpful in facilitating such a revisionist project. Tofolletti argues that the Barbie doll is an early example of the post-human, a theory in which the subject and the object are no longer distinct and binary but rather co-exist.

7. See, for example, Ernest Jones's essay "The Early Development of Female Sexuality" (1927). In it, Jones differentiates between the paths of homosexual and heterosexual women, widening the scope of Freud's work, and classifying women into distinct sexual types.

8. Eve Sedgwick expresses concern over the fact that radical feminism, espousing non-historical structuralist discourse, effectively ends up reproducing power structures rather than changing them. Citing Jane Gallop's *Daughter of Seduction* as one such example, Sedgwick argues, "historical change from this point of view appears as something outside the structure and threatening – or worse, not threatening – to it ... [Radical Feminism] can make future change appear impossible ... even though desirable" (1985, 13).

---

## References

- Baudrillard, Jean. 2006. *Simulacra and Simulacrum*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Bellafante, Gina. 2009. "Miniskirt Lib." *New York Times*, April 24, BR19.
- Birmingham Feminist History Group. 2005. "Feminism as Femininity in the Nineteen-Fifties." *Feminist Review* 80: 6-23.
- Brown, Helen Gurley. 1962. *Sex and the Single Girl*. New York: Random House.
- Conor, Liz. 2004. *The Spectacular Modern Women: Feminine Visibility in the 1920s*. Bloomington: Indiana

- University Press.
- Cixous, Hélène. 1976. "The Laugh of the Medusa" *Signs* 1 (4): 875-93.
- Friedan, Betty. 2001. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Hague, Angela. 2005. "'A Faithful Anatomy of Our Times': Reassessing Shirley Jackson." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies* 26 (2): 73-96.
- Hemmings, Clare. 2011. *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- hooks, bell. (1984) 2000. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Cambridge: South End Press.
- . 2000. *Feminism is for Everybody*. London: Pluto Press.
- Horowitz, Daniel. 1996. "Rethinking Betty Friedan and the Feminine Mystique: Labor Union Radicalism and Feminism in Cold War America." *American Quarterly* 48 (2): 1-42.
- Irigaray, Luce. 1985. *The Sex Which is Not One*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Jackson, Shirley. 1953. *Life Among the Savages*. New York: Crowell.
- Jones, Ernest. 1927. "The Early Development of Female Sexuality." *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 8: 459-72.
- Kerber, Linda K. 2002. "'I Was Appalled': The Invisible Antecedents of Second-Wave Feminism." *Journal of Women's History* 14 (2): 90-101.
- Kerr, Jean. 1957. *Please Don't Eat the Daisies*. Garden City: Doubleday.
- Neuhaus, Jessamyn. 1999. "The Way to a Man's Heart: Gender Domestic Ideology, Roles, and Cookbooks in the 1950s." *Journal of Social History* 32 (3): 529-555.
- . 2009. "'Is It Ridiculous for me to Say I Want to Write?': Domestic Humor and Redefining the 1950s Housewife Writer in Fan Mail to Shirley Jackson." *Journal of Women's History* 21 (2): 115-137.
- Meyerowitz, Joanne. 1993. "Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958." *Journal of American History* 79 (4): 1455-82.
- Moskowitz, Eva. 1996. "'It's Good to Blow Your Top': Women's Magazines and a Discourse of Discontent, 1945-1965." *Journal of Women's History* 8 (3): 66-98.
- Riviere, Joan. 1929. "Womanliness as Masquerade." *Journal of Psychoanalysis* 8: 303-13.
- Ryan, Patrick A and Sevan G. Terzian. 2009. "Our Miss Brooks: Broadcasting Domestic Ideals for the Female Teacher in the Postwar United States." *Feminist Formations* 21 (1): 76-100.
- Scanlon, Jennifer. 2009. *Bad Girls Go Everywhere: The Life of Helen Gurley Brown*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sedgwick, Eve. 1985. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia University Press.

- Tarrant, Shira. 2005. "When Sex Became Gender: Mirra Komarovsky's Feminism of the 1950s." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 33 (3): 334-55.
- Thurman, Judith. 2009. "Helenism: The Birth of the Cosmo Girl." *The New Yorker*, April 11. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/05/11/helenism?verso=true>.
- Tofolotti, Kim. 2007. *Cyborgs and Barbie Dolls: Feminism, Popular Culture, and the Posthuman Body*. New York: I.B. Tauris.
- Valenti, Jessica. 2007. *Full Frontal Feminism: A Young Woman's Guide to Why Feminism Matters*. Berkley: Perseus Books.
- Walker, Nancy. 1985. "Humor and Gender Roles: The 'Funny' Feminism of the World War II Suburbs." *American Quarterly* 37 (1): 98-113.
- Woolf, Virginia. 1977. *Three Guineas* New York: Penguin.